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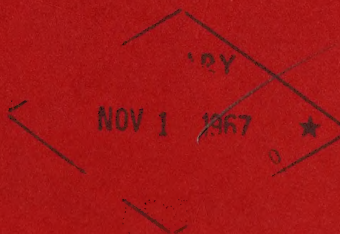
MEETING POVERTY



Canada
FACE
À LA
PAUVRETÉ

The Elimination of Poverty

R.A.J. Phillips



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THE ELIMINATION OF POVERTY

by R.A.J. Phillips

Imagine for a few moments we are on a crowded bus in the evening rush hour. Suppose through some statistical miracle, its 100 passengers represent an absolutely average bus - a true cross section of the Canadian population.

Who are our fellow passengers in this routine journey in the year of Canada's greatest prosperity?

Half the people aboard are aged 25 or younger. Like the kingdom of heaven, our population is mostly of children, a fact that may have escaped you and me but is well known to television advertisers. We will come back to those young people because in their lives we see the face of tomorrow's Canada.

The man with the newspaper is going home to his wife and 2 children. As a city-dweller he earns \$5,450 a year, which is rather more than his rural relatives. He has had 9 years of schooling or less. His real income is going up every year by 3.7%, even if he does not advance on the social and economic ladder. If the rate of increase keeps up, his eldest son at the same job will be half again as prosperous - just as that man is a third better off than his father.

This is a sign of Canada's prosperity and growth.

That family man may not stop to reflect on what that difference means in the size of his house, the year of his car, the size of his boat, the health of his family, even in the height of his children. He probably takes for granted the streets he passes in the homeward bus - the apparently contracting slums, the assertive affluence of suburban lawns and house fronts, the boldness of public and commercial buildings, the theatres, the recreation in the park, up the coast or in the mountains so quickly

attainable by freeway, tunnel, or bridge. He probably thinks even less of more intangible assets, such as the system of social security with which he has shielded himself against the accidents of hospitalization, disability, old age or unemployment. Whether he thinks the social security system good or bad, too pervasive or quite inadequate, it does represent part of his assets, and a part of the affluent society today.

One seat in the bus is occupied by a conspicuously successful business man who owns more of the comforts and diversions of material society than the richest person in all the land a half century ago. In physical comfort he may live better than Queen Victoria or John D. Rockefeller, and he too is becoming steadily more prosperous.

Eight people on the bus are beyond the normal age of retirement.

A woman in her 70's is going home alone. With some savings and a pension of \$75 she lives decently and independently without the indignity of seeking charity from her family or friends; independently, that is, unless struck by some disaster such as illness more worrying than she admits.

A gratifying fact about this bus load is that of its 32 passengers who are in the labour force, only two are unemployed. In summer it may be only one. It wasn't always like that. Thirty years ago, when the bus was passing unemployed men mobilizing for a hunger march to Victoria, one in six of the labour force was out of work -- without jobs, perhaps without homes, without hope, their children underfed, ill clothed, with thinly spread charity the only insurance against disaster. They were, to use the book title of that gifted Vancouver writer, Irene Baird, Canada's waste heritage.

But those days are little remembered by most passengers on this evening's bus. Progress has carried us far. It hasn't carried us quite as far as today's comfortable passengers might assume.

Only two men on the bus may be classified as unemployed. How many are seriously underemployed - contributing and earning far below their capacities because they are ill-equipped for today's jobs? Quite a few. Over a million were underemployed for some part of last year.

Over all these people, there are two clouds, and they are a lot bigger than a man's hand. One is that even in the midst of today's plenty, there is poverty. The other is that we are unprepared to sustain prosperity tomorrow. The two are very closely connected.

In that cross section of 100 Canadians in prosperous 1966, there are still 25 people who are, by the very rough yardsticks available to us, suffering from poverty. The standards of poverty commonly used are an income of \$3,000 for a city family of four, \$1,500 for an unmarried city dweller. For farm families, the usual standards are 80% of that. These figures are, of course, extremely approximate. There are great regional variations, and whether a family is really poor depends on more than income--the health, age, education and indeed the mental attitudes of its members. But broadly speaking, people earning less than these amounts do not have enough money for decent food, clothing, housing and those other so-called little luxuries like insurance, books, transportation, that are generally accepted as necessities in the Canadian way of life.

In these good times, the poor are not so easy to recognize amongst strangers meeting on a bus. These one in four don't carry tin cups. There is no neat statistic to tell us how many of them are going home to slum housing. Of the 25 whom we call poor, most are living in anything from run-down dwellings to outright hovels. That is partly because Canada spends so little on public housing. One respectable survey puts the deficit of housing in Canada at not less than 300,000 units. We are building public housing at the rate of 1100 units a year. That's why Canadians still live in slums. Put it another way. The total investment in public housing for all Canadians in 1964 was about \$8 million.

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One well known public building opened this past year cost \$40 million. One commercial office building cost \$75 million. One shopping centre now being built will cost \$260 million: and on public housing all across Canada - \$8 million. Do the priorities satisfy you? More figures? For public housing \$8,000,000. On tobacco \$297,214,000. On alcohol at licensed stores \$1,079,000,000. On the horses \$332,926,335 and maybe another \$100,000,000 through bookies. On tinned cat and dog food we spent \$30 million. On public housing \$24 million.

Much more is spent on luxuries than on health. One cannot easily classify the people into healthy, or unhealthy, but we can be generally certain that amongst these average citizens the amount of illness is in almost direct proportion to their income. The poorer people are sicker, their families are physically sub-standard, they and their children die younger. In part, they inherited their ill-health. As children, they had the misfortune to choose the wrong parents. From that early start of poor nutrition, poor housing, poor recreation, they are not likely to recover. Now that they are adults, they are spending less per capita on medical and dental care than people who are better off. They don't go to the doctor until there is a real emergency. They visit the dentist when it's time to have their teeth pulled out.

In Canada, there is a direct relationship between the income of a region and how long its children live. The infant mortality rate runs from 23 out of 1000 to 193. Health in Canada has been a matter of what money will buy. In our national scale of value, are you satisfied with its priority?

You and I know how important health is. We know that you and I cannot afford ill health. Can we afford to have the rest of Canada unhealthy? We need not be moved by human emotions. Let's just ask if we can afford to go on looking after generations of wasted human resources, of people who are unproductive, a public charge, a poverty link from generation to generation?

Comfortably obscured at the back of the crowded bus are a couple of poor people whose plight is beyond the comprehension of most Canadians. Figures tell part of the story. The life expectancy of new-born Canadians is 60 and 64 for boys and girls. The average age of death of Eskimos is about 20 years. This is not some utterly forgotten, inaccessible, backward country we are talking about. It's Canada. It is Canadians who are dieing off at the age of 20 years. It is Canadians whose children have one third the average chance of survival because they are poor.

Statistics are hard to remember. The picture of the poor will remain seered in your minds if you have ever seen a youngster, ill-nourished, coughing, nose running, huddled with his 6 brothers and sisters in the fetid atmosphere of a packing case shack. In relation to climate, Canada can claim some of the worst-housed people in the world. And if you think that things are better in a nice clean igloo, that's because you've never seen the filthy squalor of a cold, damp dripping snow house. Life there is poor, nasty, brutish and short, but the children die young.

Some people say - they are happy that way. Do you?

Thus, if we knew the personal problems of health or other disabilities, of poor housing and of frustration facing the strangers on the bus, the apparent prosperity might seem just a little tarnished. It is when we probe deeper into their lives that our worries really begin.

Perhaps the most difficult problem facing many of these people is that they are simply not equipped to live in today's society. They are carried along in the draught of prosperity but if that prosperity should weaken some of these people would fall quickly and heavily.

There probably should be some kind of moral equation between what we get out of this progressive society of the late 20th century and what we put into it. The material benefits are obvious to anyone who looks around, and even the poor can seize some of them. They are, however, the product of a society which is, at least in terms of the past, relatively efficient and productive. These material benefits are possible only because the modern age of technology has replaced the pick and shovel, the handloom, and the quill pen.

People have not moved at the same pace. We have either not taken seriously the complexities of education and training for the modern world, or we have taken them seriously and have failed to find answers. Either the poor are not reaching our educational system, or our educational system is not reaching the poor.

The success or failure of modern education is never going to be measured by figures alone. In part, it is going to be measured by a book some known child is reading because he has acquired the love of learning which his parents lacked. In part, it is going to be measured by the theatre or concert hall built on the site of the old saloon. Even more, it will be indicated by the conversation of men and women, by their sense of engagement with their fellowman in the sphere of the political and the social, of the intellectual and spiritual, in Canada and overseas.

I do not evaluate our educational achievement. But if we are to talk about the elimination of poverty, we have to talk about those elements of education and training which relate to the physical well-being of the citizen. Leaving aside the question of whether we have produced an educated generation of Canadians, let's just look at the background of the people in the bus.

On the average the population 15 years of age and over not attending school have achieved just a little more than elementary school education, perhaps 1 or 2 years high school. This has been enough to get by, in that disappearing period of allegedly self-made men who rose in the Horatio Alger tradition to whatever rung of society they could achieve when aggressiveness substituted for education. The incidence of a low educational level amongst the apparent captains of industry and commerce, and community leaders, is becoming rapidly less. It has been said that anyone expecting something better than a menial unskilled job by the end of this century will have to have at least 17 years of education. This is the price of modern technology. This is the price of the material benefits of our life. Who, in Canada, has paid the price?

Alarminglly few. At least five of the 100 people in the bus are functionally illiterate. In Canada, with one of the highest per capita investments in education in the world, we still have a million people who for practical purposes cannot read and write. They may be able to write their own names and perhaps they can read a few words. With education of no more than four grades they cannot read and write with enough facility to take a job requiring these simple arts, and they do not use their leisure time in absorbing or producing the written word. It is reasonable to assume that a high percentage of these functional illiterates had the capacity for education. Something went wrong and they did not get it. As a result, these are human resources that Canada is wasting. Quite apart from the unnecessary barrenness of their own lives, these people are a drag on Canadian society in both the physical and cultural sense.

Thirty-six of the hundred people in the bus never got beyond Grade 8. If they are young people, who are likely to live for the next thirty years, they should be scared. The number of jobs for which they are equipped is dwindling. They have not paid the price for participation in modern society, either through some fault of their own or through some fault of the educational system. They, too, will be an increasing burden on Canada.

With the enormous expansion of universities in Canada, we might well become complacent about higher education. We have no cause. Only 2 of the hundred Canadians in the bus have completed that level of education which is regarded as a reasonable median level for Canadians who expect to survive into the 21st century. One out of every 12 Canadians of the same age is taking university education. Our failures in this respect are bad enough when viewed in isolation. They are worse in comparison with the United States. Even though the relationship between the two educational systems is not exact, there is no masking the fact that we in Canada have been sharply less successful than our closest neighbours in measuring up to the educational responsibilities of modern society.

Of course, the educational attainments of young Canadians are gradually improving. Any figures about today's educational levels naturally include people who stopped going to school in the last century when norms were very much lower. Still, we have not been improving enough. Perhaps the most disquietening figure of all is that 30% of young Canadians between 14 and 24 have left school with only a grade 8 education and no apparent intention of returning. These are tomorrow's poor.

But what do we do about the poor of tomorrow or even of today? Do we give alms, Christmas hampers, or the modern, highly organized variants of charity? These efforts are motivated by the highest human feelings and they are needed to alleviate real suffering that is all around us. But the nature of poverty today, its effect upon society and society's effect upon it, make it fundamentally important to do something else as well: to take a sharply different approach than has ever been known before. This approach is best known as community development -- community development on a national scale.

Community development means more than the development of communities: it means the development of people in them. It means that, while better living conditions are needed, the means of achieving them are as important as the result. Community development means that we fight poverty by helping poor people to re-order their own lives instead of doing it for them. Community development means that the opportunity for the full benefits of Canadian citizenship is not a grace but a right.

Sometimes, therefore, the war against poverty must be a war against society -- a war against social ills rather than against their symptoms alone; a war against injustice as much as a war against bad teeth. "The religion of privilege," Goldwyn Smith told the Montreal Mechanics Institute almost a century ago, "has lost its power to awe or control, and if society wishes to rest on a safe foundation, it must show that it is at least trying to be just".

In the prescription for the elimination of poverty, I am not really advocating bloody revolution. I do say that we are deluding ourselves and the poor if we think that poverty is going to be eliminated either by more prosperity, or by more welfare alone. General prosperity has only sharpened the contrast between the rich and the poor, and it has not greatly reduced the numbers of poor people. The faster flows the mainstream of national life, the harder it is for those on the shore to plunge in. Depression tends to be a leveller: continued affluence is the reverse.

Welfare, with or without private charity in the conventional sense, is obviously necessary where people don't otherwise have enough to eat. Becoming an independent person, is of importance only next to food and shelter. The earning power of an unskilled man should be increased, but that is more than a matter of building classrooms to train him in. We have done that on a grand scale in recent years: spent 1 billion, 100 million for new vocational training facilities since 1961. Yet with all this expensive plant, we have had dropout rates of 50% and higher, particularly among the unemployed workers. Why? During a sample month last year, only one unemployed worker in fifty was in a training course. Increasing the earning power of a worker is much more than classrooms: it is somehow solving the problem of communication so that the worker has an interest in the education, becomes involved in it as a means of giving himself and his children a better life. We haven't solved that problem.

The elimination of poverty requires that children absorb formal education to the limits of their ability, not merely to the limits of their present inclination. More, bigger or finer schools alone will not do it. Immensely more important, and more difficult, is bridging the gulf between those who live in what is called the culture of poverty and those who do not. The educational system common in most parts of North America was inherited from an age when only the privileged few had an education.

The base has been broadened rapidly to relate to our vast middle classes, or most of them, but the educational system does not ordinarily relate to the poor. There is a barrier of misunderstanding between the child of the slums and the typical classroom with its middle class values. As one example, our school system is based on the willingness to postpone the gratification of present needs for the sake of very much higher, but distant rewards. That is a middle class idea. It seems to me to be a necessary idea for anyone wanting to be a part of modern life. It is not an idea accepted by the poor. It is, for example, utterly foreign to members of less sophisticated groups like Indians and Eskimos conditioned to the virtue of letting tomorrow take care of itself. The elimination of poverty, community development, an honest participatory democracy require that all members relate to the educational system and that the educational system relate to them.

Houses can be built or fixed with boards and paint, but the housing problem can't be solved that way. I think it is generally agreed that Canada has built up some admirable housing legislation over many years. The problem is that it is not used to meet more than a fraction of the need. How often does a community get public housing because poor people really understand the need and the possibilities and because the poor do something about it? That's what's meant by community development.

How often has public housing been stymied because slum landlords quietly block the threat to their investment? How often does it run against the opposition of the respectable people who say their property values will fall if poor people are in the neighborhood? Some of our best friends may be negroes, or Indians or Eskimos or newcomers who speak English with the wrong accent: but we wouldn't want our sisters to live near one of them.

And when there is public housing, is it a means to help those who live there to build their lives, to become part of the Canadian structure, to cease being charity cases? Who runs the housing -- a committee of well-meaning outsiders, or the poor? What is done to give the poor a sense of identity with the world around them? This is what is meant by community development. Maybe this is radicalism: it is also, in the words of the eminently respectable Goldwyn Smith, the way of building ourselves a safe foundation.

A safe foundation, and a future without charity.

What I am really submitting to you is that the elimination of poverty is an immensely complicated job, all tied up with the broader objectives of a strong Canada. And it's your job as much as mine. It's your job, not Ottawa's, or Victoria's or city hall's. Let me digress a moment on an over-simplification of civics.

The best lessons in civics are sometimes learned abroad. There's no surer way to acquire a burning faith in Canadian institutions than to live a few years in the Communist world. For me, one of the most telling perspectives into the nature of democracy came in an international conference on community development. The participants were talking with conviction and sincerity about their problems and achievements on an Israeli kibbutz, in a hill village in the Indian sub-continent, amongst the exploited natives of a South American jungle, on North American Indian reserves. There in the unconscious use of two words, people were revealing to all the world the degree of their belief in democracy. The words were "we" and "they".

They were speaking of government efforts. Some thought of the government as "they", an isolated structure like the mining company, the church, the charitable organization, the merchant. To these people, democracy was a nice platitude and nothing else. They didn't believe in government for, or by, or with, or of the people.

Others talked of the government as "we". They thought of democracy in real terms, as their own instrument to do things which an individual, or a few gathered together, cannot do. They might have been violently opposed to the political party in power at the local or national level, they might have voted against it, reviled it for its wrongdoing, deplored the pressures of power groups on it. But they still believed in democracy. They believed they could influence government. They may have taken the trouble to study issues, to write or phone their MP's, to write a letter to the editor, to get neighbors thinking and talking about national, provincial or municipal issues. Anyway, they believed in their kind of government and the possibility of progress in making it an ever truer reflection of the popular will.

I earnestly hope, for the sake of Canada, that we think of governments as "we". If we don't, let's forget about community development, about democracy and the most meaningful path to the elimination of poverty.

The fight against poverty starts with the individual citizen, and moves out to his church, club, home and school association, to his local, provincial or national government as anti-poverty measures require greater resources. An individual citizen cannot organize a national unemployment insurance or old age pension plan. That is a matter for national government when the public will supports it. On the other hand, a government is not as effective as the individual citizen in getting the personal confidence of the kid down the street who is in trouble. A department of education can organize a school system, but it is in the home and school association that the parents of poor children are made to feel genuinely welcome or not, are helped to understand something of the possible meaning of their family's education. Governments can provide programs for urban renewal or for public housing, but it is in the next block that these programs are going to succeed or fail because of the degree of real public understanding of them. It is not through the laws of parliaments that communication starts between the people who are part of the poverty culture, and those who are not.

Put another way, a common role of government is to provide the climate for social and economic betterment. It is through community development that citizens learn to come out of the rain.

Community development may be a formal approach to the elimination of poverty through specific programs under the supervision of professionals. But poverty is too important to be left to the professionals alone. The community development approach is an attitude and a program of action for every thinking Canadian who wants to do something about poverty. It is getting to know the poor, bridging the gulf between cultures. It is the really friendly act, shorn of condescension. It might be taking time with the kid who cuts the grass to find out what he thinks about education and to let him know what we think of its meaning to him. It could be listening to the milkman talking about night school and to the cleaning woman

about her search for better housing. It's spending more than money: it's spending time and patience in the conviction that human achievement is indivisible. It's going to the local volunteer bureau and finding a real sense of engagement among poor people who are going to have a lot to do with the profile of the country our children will inherit.

This, then, is the war on poverty. But "war on poverty" is a bad phrase, for it implies an authoritarian organization which is the very antithesis of democracy. It suggests action from the top instead of from the bottom, and decisions only from above. It seems to leave no place for the critics, for democratic participation. It suggests campaigns which write off the casualties of today in the hope of breakthroughs tomorrow. The war against poverty must be everything that a military campaign is not.

Yet people will no doubt go on calling it a war on poverty in conversation, and in parliament--" ...this is a war budget for raising money to wage implacable warfare against poverty and squalidness. I cannot help believing that before this generation has passed away, we shall have advanced a great step towards that good time when poverty and the degradation which always follow in its camp, will be as remote to the people of this country as the wolves which once infested its forests."

That's not from the Hansard of the last parliament. It is from Lloyd George's budget speech of 1909. The wolves are still with us.

In this present war, the professionals have their part, as long as they serve as catalysts and advisers rather than commanders. In Canada's war against poverty, the dynamic must be in the hands of individual citizen first, and in their voluntary or government organizations only second.



In that war, if we may pursue a doubtful analogy, Canada is soon to have new shock troops in the Company of Young Canadians. Coming before parliament will be legislation to establish one of the most promising organizations ever fashioned to channel positive volunteer action towards the building of a better society. It is born of a distinctive Canadian tradition. In concept it is different from any other organization working in Canada or abroad.

It is to be a group of young people run by young people with frankly idealistic aims. Its purpose is nothing short of building better worlds. While financed by government resources, it hopes to be an organization with an independence of its own. This is a bold new experience in community action on Indian reserves, in Eskimo villages, among Newfoundland outports or big city slums. The Company will be working with school dropouts, with slum children who need a headstart and added help to be a real part of the terrifying schoolroom. The Company is to serve provincial and municipal agencies, volunteer groups, or operate its own projects wherever there is a need that may be met by young people who care.

The volunteers will be called upon to make real sacrifices. Young Canadians will be asked to give two years of their lives to do something deeply important for their generation. They will face failures and frustrations as well as success. Either way, they will always be able to look back on their lives and know that they have planted a milestone in Canada's progress.

The Company of Young Canadians will be one instrument in the elimination of poverty, an instrument that should have influence far beyond their own numbers. They will not eliminate poverty. If we mean by poverty the lack of goods that richer people possess, none of us will ever eliminate poverty. We will, I fervently hope, eliminate that degree of want which is characterized by acute physical suffering, by food and clothing and shelter too meagre for people to live by. For families in city slums, in the Arctic

wastes, on reserves, in the unyielding countryside, that alone will be a great victory. Having achieved this much, there remains the infinite task of raising horizons -- economic, social, political, cultural -- so that all Canadians can increasingly benefit from our society and contribute to it.

This is our task. It seems to me to be a worthy national objective. It has a humanitarian appeal. It makes economic sense. It also gives a purpose to Canada as a community, in the community of man. I think such an objective makes Canada worth preserving.

(Note: This was an address to the
Vancouver Institute, January 8, 1966.)

